

Written Statement U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom  
Public Hearing on Bangladesh

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I would like to thank the Commission for inviting me to speak today.

IRI began working in Bangladesh in 2003 with the initial goals of strengthening domestic election observation and expanding the participation, leadership development, and influence of women and youth in politics and civil society. In 2004, IRI expanded its program to include the Five Estates of Democracy Initiative, a long-term, integrated approach aimed at overcoming political malaise in Bangladesh. This initiative was based on the theory that in a democratic society, the five estates - private industry, labor, civil society, media, and political parties – play a critical role in the political process. Initially, IRI did not work directly with political parties because we were not yet confident party leaders were able or willing to undertake necessary reforms, and lower-level leaders seemed powerless to promote change. Instead, IRI focused on strengthening the other four estates to assist them with becoming a more informed and active citizenry that would demand that the political parties be more responsive and accountable to their constituents. For example, IRI has worked to empower youth to increase their participation in civic and political activities by hosting a series of youth festivals that have provided thousands of Bangladeshi youth the opportunity to experience first hand the nuts and bolts of the political process through interactive games, simulated parliamentary campaigns and elections, and letter writing campaigns to local and national government officials.

In 2007, IRI began engaging political parties directly using one-on-one consultations and public opinion research to provide parties with information about the views and perceptions of Bangladeshi citizens, including what issues are most important to them, and what they want their government to address more effectively. On August 4, 2008, IRI conducted Bangladesh's first-ever exit poll during the Rajshahi City Corporation elections. That poll yielded valuable data about when and how voters made their decisions about who to vote for. The most significant aspect of the exit poll was that, according to our data, the election results reflected the will of the people.

On December 29, up to 80 million Bangladeshi voters will cast their ballots to decide which set of leaders will be responsible for developing solutions for the concerns of the citizens of Bangladesh. Of these, one quarter will be young, first-time voters. In preparation for these elections, originally scheduled for January 2007, IRI has focused most of its programming on election observation. IRI has supported a long-term local observation group, the National Election Observation Council (or JANIPOP), who will observe and document every stage of the election process: from the voter registration drive, to candidate registration, the campaign period, through the vote counting process.

To complement its domestic election observation support, IRI has also been planning for long- and short-term international election observation efforts. In August and October 2008, IRI conducted pre-election assessments to evaluate the state of preparations for the elections. Both assessment teams met with senior political party and election commission officials in Dhaka city, and also deployed to the six Divisions to meet with local-level political party representatives, government officials, voters, and other election stakeholders. These assessments led to IRI's conclusion that the Bangladesh Election Commission will be ready to hold the Parliamentary Elections on December 29, despite some concerns about a lack of sufficient human resources, particularly with regard to adequate numbers of knowledgeable election officers. IRI did observe some irregularities and shortcomings in preparation for the local August 4 elections; however, most could be addressed by better organization and preparation, better training for election workers -- including the security forces, more voter education, and clarification of election laws and regulations.

In November 2008, IRI deployed 26 international long-term observers who will remain in Bangladesh beyond Election Day. These observers have been deployed to 13 locations around the country, where they are meeting with electoral stakeholders, and will observe the campaign period, Election Day, and the immediate post-election period. IRI will also field an international short-term observation delegation for the election itself.

International and domestic interest in Bangladesh is now almost exclusively focused on the upcoming parliamentary elections. While these elections have been a significant benchmark, it is not an end goal of IRI's program in Bangladesh. IRI, with many others, believes strongly that democratic benchmarks must extend beyond Election Day. As a result, our programming supports a free, fair, and credible election process, while also building skills among each of the five estates that are transferable from the pre-election to the post-election period.

Even after two years of a non-political government, political parties still see electoral success

as the grand prize, but appear to place far less value and attention on the process of governing the country after an election. In other words, the parties seem to continue to place little importance on meeting the needs of constituents and solving the critical problems facing the country. Despite ongoing political stagnation, the state of emergency, as well as political and electoral reforms implemented under the interim government, have appeared to open the minds of political parties to reform, even if only slightly.

While the upcoming elections are a crucial step on the road to democracy for Bangladesh, it is critical not to lose sight of the state of governance in Bangladesh before the Caretaker Government assumed power in 2006. Bangladesh faced many governance challenges prior to the State of Emergency imposed in January 2007. Those challenges – as well as some new ones – will remain for the newly elected government to address.

With so much international and domestic focus on the elections themselves, IRI would like to stress the importance of voters as the primary stakeholders in the election process. During the August 4 local elections, IRI was impressed by the high voter turnout, very low levels of violence and other disruptions, and widespread acceptance of the results. These factors, coupled with assessment findings and IRI polling data, which indicates a high intention to vote in the parliamentary elections, are critical reminders that Bangladeshi citizens are eager to exercise their right to choose their leaders.

IRI encourages the Bangladesh Election Commission, the Government of Bangladesh, and the political parties not to lose sight of the wishes of Bangladeshi voters during these critical final weeks before the elections. We hope the current government will assure that all the proper mechanisms are in place for a free, transparent and fair election. Most importantly, if the elections are deemed to be free and fair, we hope that all political parties will accept the results as the will of the people, and play a participatory role in the next Government. The future development and economic success of Bangladesh hinges on the ability of their elected leaders to lead the country in a positive direction.

Thank you.